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MEMORANDUM

July 29. 1998

TO: Heads of Executive Departments and Agencies

SUBJECT: Implementing the Presidential Memorandum on Plain Language

Here is the guidance we promised when the President issued the plain
language presidential memorandum on June 1.

This is a critical initiative that is important to me. I expect you to make
it happen.

If you need some help getting started, call NPR at 694-0075.

Al Gore

How to Comply with the President's
  Memo on Plain Language

This information will help you comply with the President's June 1, 1998,
memo on plain language in government writing. The first section gives
instructions to agency heads for designating plain language contacts and
developing action plans. The second section gives general guidance and
explains some of the terms in the memo. The third section provides specific
information for documents related to rulemaking. The last section provides
specific information for other types of documents like letters, forms, and
instructions.

Plain Language Contacts and Action Plans

You need to do two things now:

By August 15, 1998, each agency head must designate a senior official

responsible for implementing the President's memo. This person will represent you on the Plain Language Action Network (PLAN). PLAN will be an interagency committee charged with making plain language standard in all government communication. Morley Winograd, Senior Policy Advisor to the Vice President and Director of the National Partnership for Reinventing Government (NPR), will chair PLAN.

By September 4, 1998, each agency must design its own plain language action plan, which sets out strategies for:

      communicating the President's expectations to employees,
      equipping staff with needed tools,
      meeting the deadlines in the memo, and
      sustaining change over the long term.

Remember the principles of plain language when you develop this plan. Keep it short and clear. Don't spend more time on the plan than you do writing your documents in plain language!

Send names and action plans to Annetta Cheek at the National Partnership for Reinventing Government (750 17th St., NW, Suite 200, 20006) by the deadlines above. If you have questions, call (202) 694-0075.

General Information

What does the presidential memo mean by "the public?"

The memo covers all the materials you write to your external customers. "The public" does not mean just the general public.

How do I write in "plain language"?

If you use the techniques in Writing User-Friendly Documents, a handbook available on the Internet at www.plainlanguage.gov, you will meet the President's expectations for "plain language." In general:

        - Organize your material to serve the needs of
        your reader.

        - Write sentences in the active voice and use
        "you" and other pronouns.

        - Use common, everyday words in short
        sentences.

- Use easy-to-read design features like lists, tables, graphics, and "white space."

        - Write short sentences and sections.

What are "common, everyday words"?

Common, everyday words are words and phrases your average reader is familiar with and likely to prefer over legalistic or bureaucratic terms. For example:

Compare this:

When the process of freeing a vehicle that has been stuck results in ruts or holes, the operator will fill the rut or hole created by such activity before removing the vehicle from the immediate area.

To this:

If you make a hole while freeing a stuck vehicle, you must fill the hole before you drive away.

There is a specific list of everyday words that you should substitute for legalistic or bureaucratic terms on the plainlanguage.gov web page in the reference library.

Doesn't plain language "dumb down" important government communications? Won't I lose the precision I need to enforce the law?

Using plain language will improve the clarity of your communication. Clarity and precision usually go hand in hand. If your reader needs specific technical or legal details, put them in. But think carefully about what's really necessary. Make sure you're not including information just because you always include it.

How do I organize my document to serve the needs of my reader?

To serve the needs of your reader:

- Explain how you've organized the document and how to use it.

- Use descriptive headings to help your reader find specific information more easily.

- Summarize complicated topics before you describe all the details.

- Place items of most interest to your reader at the beginning.

- Start by answering general questions and move on to specific questions later.

- Describe a process in chronological order.

- Include only information your reader really needs.

Must I write everything in questions and answers?

No, but the question-and-answer format is extremely useful for organizing your material around your reader's interests. It's a more direct way to speak to your reader, and it helps you sharpen the point you want to make. This technique works very well IF your questions reflect the reader's real concerns.

How long should my sentences be?

Your sentences should average 15 - 20 words, and never be longer than

40 words. Cut out words that aren't really necessary. For example:

Compare this:

> The Secretary of the Interior may, in specific
> cases or in specific geographic areas, adopt or
> make applicable to off-reservation Indian lands
> all or any part of such laws, ordinances,
> codes, resolutions, rules or other regulations of
> the State and political subdivisions in which the
> land is located as the Secretary shall determine
> to be in the best interest of the Indian owner or
> owners in achieving the highest and best use of
> such property.

To this:

> We may apply State or local laws to
> off-reservation lands. We will do this only if it
> will help the Indian owners make the best use of
> their lands.

My agency puts out thousands of documents each
year. Where do we start?

Use common sense. Start with the documents that reach the most people
and create the most confusion.

Is there someone at my agency responsible for
plain language?

Your agency will designate a senior official to be responsible for
implementing your plain language program. You may also have one or two
other contacts in addition to this senior official. We will post all these
names on the Plain Language Website (www.plainlanguage.gov).

Where can I get help in rewriting my documents in plain language?

Start with your agency plain language official. The Plain Language Website
at www.plainlanguage.gov offers more detailed guidance, good examples,
related reference documents, links to other plain language sites, and a
list of people willing to give you advice and assistance. If you still need
help, e-mail a message to info@plainlanguage.gov .

Documents Related to Rulemaking

What types of rulemaking documents should I write
in plain language?

The President's memo directs you to use plain language in all new proposed
and final rulemaking documents, including direct final and interim final
rules, beginning January 1, 1999. You do not have to use plain language in
final rules that you published in traditional style before that date, but
we strongly recommend that you do. Also use plain language in notices of
data availability, technical amendments, Advance Notices of Proposed
Rulemaking, and other notices related to rulemaking. You should also
improve the clarity of regulatory support documents like background

information documents, economic assessments, risk assessments, and other technical support documents.

What if I'm just revising a portion of an existing rule?

Use common sense. You should be able to use most of the elements of plain language, even if you're only revising a portion or adding to an existing rule.

Do I have to redo all our existing rules in plain language?

No, the presidential memo does not require this. But you are supposed to rewrite existing rules as time and resources permit. Again, start with the rules that impact the most people or are the most confusing.

How will I know if my rulemaking document is in plain language?

Ask for input from people who use the rule. Do reader testing through surveys, focus groups, or protocol testing. Another option is to include a statement like the following in the preamble of a proposed rule:

Clarity of this regulation.

Executive Order 12866 and the President's memorandum of June 1, 1998, require each agency to write all rules in plain language. We invite your comments on how to make this proposed rule easier to understand. For example:

- Have we organized the material to suit your needs?

- Are the requirements in the rule clearly stated?

- Does the rule contain technical language or jargon that isn't clear?

- Would a different format (grouping and order of sections, use of headings, paragraphing) make the rule easier to understand?

- Would more (but shorter) sections be better?- Could we improve clarity by adding tables, lists, or diagrams?

- What else could we do to make the rule easier to understand?

Other Types of Documents

What other types of documents should I write in plain language?

Write in plain language all forms, letters, instructions, and other documents that tell people how to obtain a benefit or comply with a requirement. Some generic examples are:

- An acceptance or rejection letter.

- A request for information you need to process an application or request.

- A violation or enforcement notice.

- A publication that tells how to meet a requirement or obtain a benefit.

Some specific examples are:

- An OSHA publication explaining safety requirements for factories.

- A Bureau of Land Management publication explaining how to adopt wild horses.

- A Social Security Administration pamphlet explaining how to apply for survivor's benefits.

Must I rewrite old documents in plain language?

Yes, rewrite documents created before October 1, 1998. Your agency may need to develop a strategy for doing this work in phases. If your readers tell you that certain materials are already clear, don't redo them, and don't rewrite material you no longer provide to the public.

How will I know if my document is in plain language?

Ask your customers. Do reader testing through surveys, focus groups, or protocol testing. You might also include a statement at the end of your document like this:

Plain Language Instructions

> We try to write clearly. If you can suggest
> how to improve the clarity of these
> instructions, call or write (appropriate
> contact).

You could also post notices in offices where you distribute forms or instructions. For example:

> Our Commitment to Plain Language
>
> We've tried to make all of our forms, notices,
> letters, and pamphlets easy to understand. If
> you can suggest how to write our documents
> more clearly, call or write (appropriate
> contact).

The American people expect clear information from their government, and the President and the Vice President take this expectation very seriously. Plain language in all of our communication is the very foundation of good service to our customers.

[This document is available on the following website: http://plainlanguage.gov/.]